

REFLECTIONS ON THE STRUGGLE WITH SATAN

Breaking through into a new dimension of spirituality, as we have done, radically alters the struggle in the spirit deeps. We are going to discover the poetry of "no problems." But poetry about the contradiction of Satan is not the kind you hang on the wall. All your life you have been struggling with Satan. But once you break through into the other world, you see that struggle, and that makes the experience of the struggle entirely different. It is as though there was no relation to past struggles whatsoever. Therefore, you ought, you have to be prepared.

This struggle with Satan is not some ethereal thing. It is very concrete, and it can be put into scientific language, or, if you will permit me, into "scientific poetry." I have chosen to approach this through the terms of evaluational theory, evaluational philosophy. The man who has most influenced me here is Nicholai Hartman. Yet I have to list John Stuart Mill and Westmark along with Hartman. Concretely and practically, whenever you think of values, you have to think of the scientific poetry and the evaluational philosophy, plus one other area that is represented by these two men.

Hartman emphasized the objectivity of values. To avoid the idea that values exist, he used the word "subsist," but he maintained that they are objective. That is why we are going to spell out the objectivity of awe philosophically. This is crucial, for if awe is still something subjective, then we have been wasting a lot of time. But if you follow Hartman, then you have to say that awe subsists.

However, in his emphasis upon the objectivity of values, I think Hartman was, in one sense, wrong. At the least, he left out what the subjectivists emphasized in their theory, the fact that value has to do with internal propensity. That is, nothing is valuable unless I have a corresponding propensity for it or toward it. For example, if I did not experience hunger, food would not be of value to me. If I did not have a sexual instinct, then the sex act would have no meaning, and would be of no value.

Now I think that perhaps Hartman was wrong, in that he attempted to think of values, such as the good, as entities or essences, in themselves. He tried to do this in a non-abstract way which turned out to be highly abstract. A value, to use Plato's language, is a form. Hartman would have been right, in my opinion, if he had seen that the objectivity of values is the objectivity that empirical science has emphasized. A chair or a loaf of bread is valuable; that is the objectivity of values. Or a particular colleague is valuable, to use a person as an example. But the value of a person likewise is not synonymous with your propensity. If you can get the subjective and the objective aspects of these values clear, then we can bring in the third dimension of this, which is the existential. As you could probably guess, this is from H. Richard Niebuhr.

To recapitulate, I have propensities, and there are objective correspondants to those propensities. However, these do not define values, unless

you bring in the personal element, which is the existential. The existential is the context in and through which I understand myself. When you bring these three together, then you have the value. There is an objectivity in that, in the sense that it is not synonymous with myself, though I do not grasp myself except in relationship to value.

You may have been offended, as I have been for many years, with phrases like "the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil." I have been so offended that for years I could hardly read passages that contained such language, and yet you will find it in many of the classical prayers. But whoever invented it is ontologically over-against the moralism by which I was caught. You can imagine a Methodist hearing a word like "worldliness." But can you imagine a Methodist hearing "flesh?" For a Methodist, that made the category of the devil quite unnecessary. For me, at the ontological level, there is a kind of awe over the creativity of whatever unknown saint from the past came up with that formula. You can see now that what I said above is the negative articulation of the theory of value, and it puts exact concretion on the meaning of the devil.

In theological language, you and I talk about internal perversions, and we talk about objective idols. Now you can see these coming together. Buddhism has been particularly interested in overcoming the propensities. I think the way it handled that was utterly wrong, but you can see the reality with which they were struggling. You are a trapped man so long as you live in bondage to your propensities. You live in illusions, and you live in a prison with invisible bars, and you are an unhuman.

The Hebrews liked to emphasize the objectivity of the Satanic struggle. They were very clear that the gods of this world are always realities in this world, which means, given this perspective, that they are not gods at all. The Hebrews, and here I go back to Elijah, were interested in the flight of the gods. But they could not have talked about gods in terms of the things of this world if they had not brought in the subjective element. Actually, neither could the Buddhists talk about the perversions here were they not talking about a disrelationship or a false relationship to the things of this world.

But we have still not reached the devil. If, however, you introduce Kierkegaard into the discussion, then you are able to bring in the relationships to that which is a disrelationship, and which comes from relating to a temporality as though it were the eternality of your life. At that point you encounter Satan. Your struggle is always going to be with the devil. You do not have three things to struggle against, that is, the world, the flesh and the devil. You have only one thing. There is no devil, except the objective false gods and the subjective perversions of humanness, and these have to do with the way in which you relate to your total life. This is exactly the point of your vulnerability to Satan.

What I have been saying is that you are going to have to pull out your sword and fight Satan, and therefore, you had better know where his

vulnerable points are. I think that in this bit of poetry, "the world, the flesh and the devil," our Fathers of the church have passed on to us, in somewhat cryptic language, exactly where our points of vulnerability are. They have revealed our jugular vein. For it is necessary to know the precise points at which Satan attacks us. Our jugular vein is our relationship to anything in this world. But the question is only raised here because we have propensities, although the things of this world and our propensities are good. So Satan never attacks at either one of these points. He attacks you in terms of your relationships to those things and those propensities. This is where the awful question of your family will be raised as well as the awful question of the goods of this world. Only, it is not you who will be raising these questions, but Satan.

--Joseph W. Mathews